

*Identifying and Correcting Barriers to Successful Inclusive Practices: A Literature Review*

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*Abstract*

The inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom is one of the most debated subjects in the field of education today. A review of the literature revealed that while inclusion has been shown to benefit children who receive special education services alongside their non-disabled peers, there are a number of barriers that prevent the practice and procedure of inclusion from being successfully implemented. Lack of teacher training, ineffective instruction, and overall teacher attitudes have been identified as the most prominent barriers to the inclusion process and suggestions for future study indicate that more information to determine the extent to which disabled children are academically, socially and emotionally impacted by those barriers.

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The study of the educational experiences of special education students has been an area of focus for many studies. Researchers are interested not only in finding ways for students with disabilities to be included in the general education curriculum and to be successful in academics, but also in finding the implementation and development of policies, strategies and other academic support systems that promote it. Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012) posits that, inclusive education refers to the practice of including another group of students in regular classrooms: students with physical, developmental, or social-emotional disabilities, and those with chronic health problems (p. 403). Education in a least restrictive environment states that students with disabilities are to receive their education in the general education classroom setting unless the nature of their disability prevents them from being adequately serviced in a general education classroom setting (IDEA). The inclusion model requires general education and special education teachers collaborate to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms but general and special education teachers are unaware of their collaborative roles in an inclusive environment (Nichols & Nichols, 2010).

There has been a push to move all students with disabilities into general education classrooms but several problems have been identified and investigated in order to determine why inclusion does not succeed in public schools. Barriers to successful inclusive practices have been identified as lack of teacher training, ineffective classroom instruction and teacher attitudes. Each of these elements are critical in the overall progression of any classroom, but becomes even more important when the subject of inclusion is integrated into the equation. Because special education students often require accommodations and modifications, instruction needs to address student learning differences as mandated by several federal laws, including the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA).

IDEA is the federal act that offers guidelines for the education of students with exceptionalities. In addition, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation supports the implementation of IDEA practices in regular education classrooms. According to both laws, teachers who educate students with disabilities should (1) be considered highly qualified, (2) provide accommodations and modifications as required by the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and (3) instruct students in the least restrictive environment. (See Figure 1 Literature Map).

### *Highly Qualified*

According to the language of NCLB, a highly qualified teacher is one that is fully licensed by the state and endorsed in the subject area with no licensure requirements waived on any basis. However, many teachers are finding themselves unable to meet these standards when it comes to inclusion of students who require special considerations in regular classroom environments. The problem of inadequate teacher training was explored in the article, “Alternative Route Programs for Certification in Special Education: Program Infrastructure, Instructional Delivery, and Participant Checklist.” (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misar, 2007), where it was determined that the need for a reformation in teacher preparation is evident, there is little evidence to support how such preparation would assist teachers in educating students with disabilities. (Rosenberg et al., 2007). Furthermore, little is known about programs that purport to offer alternative routes to meeting the requirements of professional development for prospective education teachers. The study conducted by Rosenberg et al. (2007) sought to compare the prevalence of alternative route programs to the shortage of special education teachers. The number of teachers who were not fully certified was correlated with the number of AR programs, with a statistical significance of .01 and a national average at 12.5%.

Keigher, A. (2010) found that 49 states report a shortage of special education teachers/related service personnel for 2013-2014. Shortages of fully certified personnel and unfunded positions impede the ability of students with disabilities to reach their full academic potential and hinder the work of districts to prepare all students (Futernick, 2007). Many see the shortage of special education teachers as an issue that directly affects the quality of teachers who are working in the public school systems. According to the Statistics found in Special Education Personnel Shortages Factsheet, special education teachers leave the teaching profession at nearly double the rate of their general education colleagues (12.3% vs. 7.6%). Furthermore, a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor (2009), the demand for special educators is expected to increase by 17% from now through 2018. If that is not disturbing enough, 98% of the nation’s school districts report special education teacher shortages (McLeskey, Tyler and Flippin, 2003, 2004)

In a study first conducted by Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, and Terhanian (1998) over a decade ago, it was found that of the 50, 000 teachers investigated, there was a chronic shortage of teachers with full-licensure (as cited by Nougaret, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2007). The research documented that, even today, over a quarter of the teachers employed in school systems across the country either lack full licensure or do not meet full requirements in the area in which they teach. Moreover, there was evidence from the study that traditional teacher licensure programs improve teacher competence. This was particularly true when traditionally trained teachers were compared to teachers who received little or no systematic training (Nougaret et al., 2007).

Because little information existed that showed comparison rates of special education teachers under similar circumstances, the authors chose this area as the focus of their research.

Likewise, the concept of teacher training applies to both pre-service and professional development. Paulsen (2005) contended that pre-service teachers need explicit instruction and practice to be able to implement strategies effectively with their students. Not only is it important to deliver effect, explicit instruction to teachers seeking to enter the field, it is also equally important to provide opportunities for these teachers to practice these skills through their coursework or in field-based experiences (Paulsen, 2005). The author suggested that explicit instruction be delivered in the form of advance organizers, modeling, guided practice, scaffolding, and review. Furthermore, it was concluded that pre-service teacher candidates would be more masterful educators if they were taught explicitly how to implement effective instructional strategies. Although the preliminary data was collected using elementary school students, the results indicated that explicit instruction and practice can uniformly be applied to secondary students with equal or comparable success.

### *Effective Teacher Instruction*

Teachers who are equipped with instructional choices are less frustrated and more productive in the classroom (Baker 2005). One choice is differentiated instruction. Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of exceptional students can prove difficult. Accommodations and modifications should be specific to the learning needs of each student while the teacher maintains the overall focus of the general education curriculum. McDonnell, Johnson, Polychronis, and Risen (2002) found that while there is potential of positive outcomes in inclusive education, designing and implementing such instruction can be a challenge for teachers in general education classes. Despite this acknowledge, it is conceded that embedded instruction has proven beneficial for special education students in acquiring target skills. The authors supported their research by suggesting that their findings are consistent with previous research on embedded instruction for students with severe disabilities and preschool children with disabilities.

Prior to the passing of federally legislation, exceptional students did not undergo a smooth transition into mainstream classrooms. Many dropped out of school by the time they reached high school while others saw little, if any progression in academics. Once federal mandates were introduced, school systems slowly began to actively participate in creating plans for how special education students would be integrated into mainstream classrooms. According to Berry (2006), despite the challenges general education teachers face in differentiating instruction, these teachers should be prepared to accommodate and support their (exceptional children) participation.

Students with exceptionalities have been found to struggle with handwriting, spelling, vocabulary, sense of audience, and text structures. Explicit instruction in these areas is recommended, with the teacher providing frequent and extended opportunities for students to practice improving their skills in the areas in which they struggle. Learning should be both a social opportunity as well as an opportunity to acquire knowledge. The study emphasized the

importance of teacher strategies being linked to their unique pedagogical perspectives (Berry, 2006).

### *Teacher Attitudes*

Teacher perceptions is another element that has been identified as a possible barrier to successful inclusive practices. Whether or not a teacher supports the idea of inclusion into mainstream classrooms can determine how well the teacher implements practices that will promote the learning of all students. Teachers' negative attitudes towards students with disabilities lead to low expectations from their students which result to decreased learning opportunities and low academic performance (Carrington & Brownlee, 2001). According to Hunter-Johnson, Cambridge-Johnson, and Newton (2014), some teachers refuse to instruct the students who are characterized as slow or struggling and would rather focus on the more independent workers often referred to as the high flyers. The role of teachers in inclusive education is a crucial one; it is imperative that their perceptions towards this practice are assessed so that necessary elements are implemented in an effort to address both the students' and teachers' needs (p. 2).

Watnick and Sacks (2006) investigated this issue in their article, "A Snapshot of Teacher Perceptions on Full Inclusion in an International Urban Community: Miami-Dade County, Florida." Like Berry (2006), Watnick and Sacks (2006) pointed out that successful inclusive programs not only focus on curriculum, but also on social interactions as well. Those who view inclusion less favorably usually did not provide learning opportunities that meet the needs of all special education students. Prior research about the effectiveness of three classroom models found that after a year, achievement outcomes for students with disabilities were unsatisfactory.

Three models of inclusive practices were identified as the (1) external model, (2) internal model, and (3) specialized support model. Schools used for the survey were randomly selected, but the researchers knew the respondents. The study utilized surveys to track teacher responses to questions about their practices in the classroom. Most teachers who responded at all to the survey said that they practiced some sort of inclusive practice. (Watnick & Sacks, 2006,). Teacher attitudes and desire to participate play a key role in the effective implementation of a full inclusion program. The teachers who found inclusion to be a favorable practice found that students' academic progress was more positive as a result of increased interaction with their regular classroom peers. The identified factors that influence the success are: (1) the student participants selected for the study, (2) school and community support, and (3) teachers training.

Teacher attitudes were further explored by J. Kossewska (2006), who pointed out that the key to mainstreaming is the attitude of the teachers of the child who is different. The findings in various studies concluded that attitudes held by both regular and special educators towards students with disabilities determine success or failure of inclusion. The study supports previous statements that assert that teachers who favorably view inclusion see more positive results in the accomplishments of their special education students. Kossewska's research even found a causal relationship between gender and teacher perceptions, with male teachers having more negative attitudes about inclusion than females. However, a subsequent study found the opposite to be true. Not only were males found to have more positive attitudes about inclusion, but they tended to have more confidence in teaching children with disabilities.

Studies administered to determine the effects of teacher attitudes on inclusion have been separated into several categories: (1) acceptance/rejection issues, (2) teachers' tolerance and effectiveness, (3) teachers individual differences and personality characteristics. Secondary education teachers with neither contact with exceptional children nor train in special education had less positive attitudes about mainstreaming. Furthermore, there was supporting evidence that teachers in secondary schools were less accepting of inclusion than elementary school teachers. Moreover, other research has indicated that teacher-training programs should include more personal development training to prepare students for teaching in inclusive settings. (Kossewska, 2006).

The need for inclusion has become an international issue as human rights organizations and various laws seek to provide guidelines for special education. Decades ago, students with disabilities were either placed in special schools, kept at home, or institutionalized. Even today, teachers who view inclusion favorably still believe that certain disabilities should be excluded from the classroom. The more severe the student's disability, the less favorable the teacher perception of inclusion (Mdikana, et al., 2007). Inclusive attitudes in several countries were examined and it was concluded that teacher attitudes were closely associated with cultural acceptance of exceptional education. For example, other research found in the United States, teachers' attitudes have the most positive attitudes (as does Germany) because of standard inclusive practices. Laws such as Public Law 94-1423 may have provided an incentive for American teachers to embrace inclusion; as such laws were implemented so that teachers become accountable for how they differentiate their instruction to include all learners. In countries where inclusion was not readily embraced, the authors pointed out that little, if any, training was available for these teachers and very few opportunities existed for integration (Mdikana et al., 2007).

Most studies conducted on this subject have mentioned that teachers are often hesitant about inclusion because they are not comfortable about their ability to teach special students and they are not sure about their ability to manage these students. This study was conducted under the assumption that teacher attitudes may act to facilitate or constrain the implementation of inclusive education. Participants were graduate education students who were in their final year of study, which included 22 students in all. Information was gathered through questionnaires divided into two parts. The first part of the questionnaire asked participants about factors that influenced attitudes and were designed to provide background information. The second part focused on pre-service educators' attitudes towards inclusion. The results supported previous findings that teachers generally favored inclusion. However, it was also noted that due to the limited number of participants, these findings should not be attributed to the beliefs of the general population of teachers.

### *Conclusions*

More research is needed to determine the most effective models for inclusion to promote student success. Research could include a correlational study that focuses on positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion and student test data or the impact of professional development on the attitudes and beliefs of teachers in an inclusive environment. Other studies could focus on the role of administrators in the success or failure of inclusion in their schools or district, or the role of the

special education teacher in facilitating positive transitions of students and teachers in the general education classroom. Inclusion is not a faddish reform movement that will fade over time. Therefore, educators, administrators and policymakers are charged with the task of finding what works, monitoring progress, and adapting their practices in order to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom.

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**Figure 1**

